Who Needs Liberating?

Averil Cameron

We are used to thinking about classical Athens as the home of democracy and freedom. Sometimes the uncomfortable thought may occur that this liberated society ran on slave labour. But what about the women, that other non-liberated class? (We can leave aside children's liberation in a society where the exposure and sale of unwanted children was a regular practice.) What too of the women of the Roman Republic, known only by the feminine form of their fathers' names? Or the apparently liberated ladies of the early Roman Empire - the two Julias, not to mention Poppaea and Messalina?

Though we in Britain probably lag behind our North American colleagues in this respect, Women's Studies in relation to the ancient world are thriving, as shown, for instance, by the response to a current University of London Ancient History seminar on 'Images of Women'. At the first meeting the room was overflowing (and soon became very hot) and prepared handouts quickly ran out. We soon learned to provide more!

Silent or silenced?

Unfortunately, however, the position of women in the ancient world is far from easily dealt with. It is partly a matter of evidence: nearly all ancient literature was written by men for men and could hardly present the woman's point of view. Few of the very small number of educated women of whom we do hear (such as Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi) actually wrote anything herself. That is why the Greek poetess Sappho has seemed so extraordinary. Even out of the minute list of female writers in antiquity, some may actually be fictitious, as has been suggested in the case of Erinna, usually held to be the author of a poem on the (too?) appropriate theme of *The Distaff.* The men who wrote most of Greek and Latin literature rarely bothered to write about women – so much so that Sir Moses Finley could write of Roman women as the 'Silent Women of Rome', since we know hardly anything of them. When they did mention them, it was usually to condemn; Aristotle, for example, thought the emancipation of women at Sparta in the fourth century B. C. an example of moral decline. In his view women, like slaves, must be subject to the head of their household.

But the situation was not always the same. I shall focus now just on three different cases – women in classical Athens, the notion of 'liberation' in the early Roman Empire (take the women in Tacitus's *Annals,* for instance), and the effect of Christianity on the situation of women in the ancient world. All three are highly problematic; and we can no longer simply project our own preconceptions onto the classical world, as many earlier writers on the subject did.

Lysistrata submissive?

In the case of Athens in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C., the main problem lies in reconciling opposing evidence. For while the orators suggest that women had little personal freedom, and while Thucydides can make Pericles say that a woman's glory is not to be mentioned by men, Greek tragedy is full of dominant women, and Aristophanes's *Ecclesiazusae* and *Thesmophoriazusae* (not to mention *Lysistrata)* are realistic enough to remind us of our own friends holding forth at a public meeting. Scholars used to cope with this by writing articles advocating either the ‘freedom' or the 'subjection' of Athenian women, according to the evidence they preferred. But modern Women's Studies is more subtle and more willing to allow for differences.

Things are not so straightforward: non-literary evidence tends to support the view that better-off Athenian women at least were expected to conform to submissive models of behaviour, to tolerate their husbands' finding their recreation in male, and often homosexual, company, and being entertained by courtesans rather than by their wives. But then one does not have to look far for parallels in modern Western society which seem innocuous enough to us, because we think we understand how men and women really behave when they are together and are not forced merely to deduce it from art or literature. The more interesting question, perhaps, is why Greek tragedy (which women may not even have been allowed to attend) seems to be so preoccupied at times with male-female relations; and why, if real women were held of no account in Greek society except for the bearing and legitimization of children, it so often features strong female characters like Clytemnestra and Medea.

Liberation, wordly or spiritual

Clearly social class comes into it. Women of the lower classes have probably nearly always been freer than their superiors, for economic need did not allow them the luxury of living like 'ladies'. In the early Roman Empire, however, if there was liberation for women at all, it touched only a very few, the high-class society ladies in Rome, who could now become influential within certain limits, and rich in their own right. They could change husbands and take lovers. But even so, this was an indirect power exercised mainly through men; they could not enter politics as such or lead a public life in any direct sense. This is not a liberation that modern feminists would recognise. And for the vast majority, life simply stayed the same.

Or did it? St Paul said that in Christ there was no male nor female, and many people have taken this together with the obvious prominence of women in the *Acts of the Apostles* (Priscilla, Tabitha, Dorcas and so on) to conclude that Christianity itself gave women a better position than they could attain in the classical world. Contemporaries noted that it spread more quickly among women (and slaves too, for that matter). But a general improvement is most unlikely: Paul's words must be understood in a spiritual, not a worldly sense. Yet we do encounter powerful Christian women at a later date, especially at the end of the fourth century AD, when the empire itself had become officially Christian. In a paradoxical way, Christian women of high social class (see again the importance of class distinctions) could gain for themselves a sort of independence, (and incidentally shock their male relatives) by renouncing their marriages and property and choosing the life of asceticism – rather like the Victorian blue-stockings who defied their families by choosing the life of academic spinsterhood in the name of women's education.

There was never any call for women's rights in the ancient world, or attempt to change the position of women as such, except perhaps in certain extreme religious sects. But questions about ancient women are likely to seem more and more relevant, as we increasingly see the ancient world in terms of the techniques and questions of modern history and sociology. Strong, and in many cases unpalatable, assumptions about women were frequently made in the ancient world, and they are as much a part of classical culture as the works of Homer or Vergil. If we prefer to ignore them we are shutting our eyes to what classical culture was really like.

Avril Cameron is Professor of Ancient History at King's College. London. With Mrs. Amelie Kuhrt and Professor Fergus Millar, she has organised the current seminars on 'Images of Women'. There will be more detailed articles on women in the Ancient world in future issues of **Omnibus**.